



Securing Our Borders, Smartly

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

For two years, Congress has debated proposals to reform our broken immigration laws and secure our borders. Unfortunately, little progress has been made on a comprehensive solution to this problem, but we have taken some needed steps to better secure our borders.

Last year, Congress appropriated a substantial increase in funding for various measures, including additional technology and personnel. And one of the additional steps we took—authorizing a 700-mile fence at specific places along the U.S. border with Mexico—is now the topic of great debate. Some lawmakers have suggested it will not, and should not, be built, while others believe strongly that it should.

The fence, which received 80 Senate votes, has become a symbol in Washington. Some view the fencing law as a sign that Congress was finally starting to get serious about protecting the borders and restoring respect for the rule of law. Others see the fence as a barrier between two countries that should instead be building bridges—and that it is a ‘solution’ that will serve only to waste taxpayer money.

In mid-January, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison and I invited several mayors from Texas border communities to meet in Washington with Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. The discussion topic was border security, and how best to achieve it. DHS is consulting with a variety of interested parties, including those along the border, to ensure that they are aware of the on-the-ground circumstances.

There was a strong consensus among the border leaders that securing the border is vital. There was also unanimity among the mayors that a 700-mile fence, built without consultation with state and local officials, consideration of viable alternatives and with its location dictated by Washington, would be counter-productive. The border mayors offered several suggestions on improving border security without incurring the cost and headaches over private property rights and environmental problems that would accompany the fence as proposed.

I thought the meeting was valuable in several ways. It reinforced my longstanding belief that Washington does not have a monopoly on wisdom, that people near to the problem often have insights on how to address and resolve it.

The mayors share my concern for increased border security, and for making it effective. We

must balance security with legitimate trade and travel. They are concerned about their local economy. But they are acutely aware that respect for our laws is diminishing as we fail to address our porous border, and they know that trend must not continue.

The situation is being increasingly recognized, in our post-9/11 world, as a national security problem. We are starting to apprehend illegal entrants not only from Central and South America, but from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Much of the increase has been in Texas. Between 2002 and 2005, apprehensions of non-Mexicans have increased by more than 1,000 percent in Del Rio, more than 385 percent in Laredo and 604 percent in McAllen.

Securing the border is going to be costly. We need to double our Border Patrol agents, implement physical barriers where it makes sense, and employ advanced technology such as sensors and other electronic devices to make our effort effective. All of these steps will be expensive. We will need additional fencing and physical barriers where it’s appropriate. But that’s only a part of the solution.

The new Congress will soon take up immigration reform and border security once again. We need to find a solution that protects our country from drug dealers and terrorists, restores respect for our often-ignored immigration laws, takes into account human concerns, and protects our economy.

Our meeting with the border mayors was a reminder that there are good ideas out there, particularly in Texas, which has more foreign border than any other state. We’ll need new ideas to resolve the impasse that has stopped immigration reform up until now. And we’ll need to work together to address one of the top domestic priorities facing our nation.

Sen. Cornyn is Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Immigration. He also serves as Vice Chairman of the Senate Republican Conference and a member of the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. He is Vice Chairman of the Senate Ethics Committee. For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns:

www.cornyn.senate.gov/column